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## **The Importance of Candidates' Websites in Swiss National Elections between 2007 and 2011**

Brändli, Matthias ; Wassmer, Christian

**Abstract:** Candidates in election campaigns are able to choose from a number of instruments to make themselves heard. Besides more traditional campaigning instruments, such as canvassing, leafleting, or paid advertising, only recently established forms of online communication, such as websites, present a “widening of the political playing field” for political actors (Ward Gibson, 2009). While there is an on-going debate, in- and outside of academia about the actual relevance of these new campaigning instruments and the consequences they might have on the candidates themselves, the media, and the electorate, studies which actually take the perspective of the candidates into account are rather scarce. Furthermore, one could argue that developments such as the attitudes towards new technologies can fruitfully be assessed by adopting a longitudinal perspective. In this study, we try to tackle these shortcomings by measuring the attitudes of candidates in the Swiss National Elections in 2007 and 2011 towards the various campaigning instruments they employed – on- and offline. Building on the theoretical framework developed by Ward and Gibson (2009), and Anstead and Chadwick (2009), we hypothesize that structural characteristics, of either the media or political system, determine the use and relevance of candidates' websites in election campaigns. Surprisingly, however, we do not only find that the share of candidates using a website in their campaign is relatively constant, but also that the relevance candidates attribute to their website is remarkably stable between 2007 and 2011. In comparison with offline campaigning instruments, such as canvassing or leafleting, candidates' websites are seen to be the least important instrument in use. However, when compared to more recent forms of online tools used for e-campaigning, such as Facebook or Twitter, candidates' websites are much more relevant in the eyes of the candidates than these newly established instruments.

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## **The Importance of Candidates' Websites in Swiss National Elections between 2007 and 2011**

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## **Abstract**

Candidates in election campaigns are able to choose from a number of instruments to make themselves heard. Besides more traditional campaigning instruments, such as canvassing, leafleting, or paid advertising, only recently established forms of online communication, such as websites, present a “widening of the political playing field” for political actors (Ward & Gibson, 2009). While there is an on-going debate, in- and outside of academia about the actual relevance of these new campaigning instruments and the consequences they might have on the candidates themselves, the media, and the electorate, studies which actually take the perspective of the candidates into account are rather scarce. Furthermore, one could argue that developments such as the attitudes towards new technologies can fruitfully be assessed by adopting a longitudinal perspective. In this study, we try to tackle these shortcomings by measuring the attitudes of candidates in the Swiss National Elections in 2007 and 2011 towards the various campaigning instruments they employed – on- and offline. Building on the theoretical framework developed by Ward and Gibson (2009), and Anstead and Chadwick (2009), we hypothesize that structural characteristics, of either the media or political system, determine the use and relevance of candidates’ websites in election campaigns. Surprisingly, however, we do not only find that the share of candidates using a website in their campaign is relatively constant, but also that the relevance candidates attribute to their website is remarkably stable between 2007 and 2011. In comparison with offline campaigning instruments, such as canvassing or leafleting, candidates’ websites are seen to be the least important instrument in use. However, when compared to more recent forms of online tools used for e-campaigning, such as Facebook or Twitter, candidates’ websites are much more relevant in the eyes of the candidates than these newly established instruments.

## **1. Introduction**

Candidates in election campaigns are able to choose from a number of instruments to make themselves heard. Besides more traditional campaigning instruments, such as canvassing, leafleting, or paid advertising, only recently established forms of online communication, such as websites, present a “widening of the political playing field” for political actors (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 34). Personal websites play an important role in election campaigns and function as some of the major contact points and places to go for information about the candidates (Emmer & Bräuer, 2010, p. 327). While there is an on-going debate, in- and outside of academia, about the actual relevance of these new campaigning instruments and the consequences they might have on the candidates, the media, and the electorate, studies which take the perspective of the candidates into account are rather scarce. Furthermore, we hold that developments such as attitudes towards new technologies can fruitfully be assessed by adopting a longitudinal perspective.

In the following, we focus on the importance of candidates’ websites in the Swiss national elections. Personal websites are, on the one hand, an increasingly popular and important tool for candidates to present themselves to a wider public. Personal websites can further function as a representative platform for the candidates to foster exchange and possible interaction with their respective electorate (Esterling, Lazer, & Neblo, 2011). On the other hand, the adoption and use of new technologies can be situated in the discussion about the growing professionalization of political campaigns (Schweitzer, 2006). Therefore, the aim of our paper is twofold: Firstly, we aim to analyse the adoption of personal websites by candidates in the Swiss national elections between 2007 and 2011. Secondly, we seek to explain which factors predict the perceived importance of a candidate’s personal website – and how these factors change over time.

In this paper, we follow the notion that structural characteristics of the political and the media system, as well as individual capacities and incentives, facilitate and limit the use of online communication by political actors (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 34-37; Anstead & Chadwick, 2009). Modern information and communication technologies such as the Internet and political institutions are interwoven in a dialectical relationship. The use and importance of personal websites is shaped by political institutions; online communication may in turn affect the design of the institutional structures (Anstead & Chadwick, 2009; Zittel, 2009).

The remainder of our paper is organised as follows: In section 2, we briefly outline our main research questions in greater detail. In section 3, we present the theoretical framework of our research which focuses on the structural characteristics which might influence the perceived importance of candidates’ websites. We then turn in section 4 to the model and hypotheses

derived from the theoretical framework, before describing the method we used to test our hypotheses in section 5. In section 6, we present the results of our analysis. In section 7, we conclude with a discussion of the results and the representative function of personal websites in Swiss national election campaigns.

## **2. Research Questions**

Personal websites of candidates have become increasingly popular and more common in election campaigns around the globe (Foot, Xenos, Schneider, Kluver, & Jankowski, 2009; Gibson & Ward 2009, among others), as they display a number of valuable advantages for candidates in their respective election campaigns (Benoit & Benoit, 2005, p. 232-234). Among these advantages, the relative cost-efficiency of a personal website, compared to other campaigning instruments such as paid advertising, the direct contact with the electorate and the possibility to convey one's own standpoints in the desired depth, without the filter and selection criteria of the media being applied ("disintermediation"), and the chance for, at least, interaction and interactivity with possible voters, stand out in the context of this study. A personal website provides a platform for presentation and representation and the direct targeting of specific strata of voters (Benoit, 2007, p. 79). These advantages, however, are partly overshadowed by possible disadvantages of personal websites, such as the relatively low use of political websites in general by the public, the fact that personal websites only reach certain parts of the electorate (Norris, 2003), while others are still offline ("digital divide") and the necessary, and possibly limited, technical capacities of the candidates (Benoit & Benoit, 2005, p. 234-235). Additionally, the cost-efficiency of personal websites is contrasted by the resources, in terms of time and money, professionally maintained, administered and curated websites nevertheless consume. Following our argumentation, the adoption and the importance of personal websites are mainly shaped by structural characteristics of the political and the media system, and the individual capacities and incentives of the candidates. In accordance with the diffusion of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), we are especially interested in changes over time. The main research questions to be investigated in this paper therefore ask:

*Research Question 1: How did the importance of personal websites in the Swiss national elections change between 2007 and 2011?*

*Research Question 2: Which structural characteristics of the political and media system, and which individual capacities and incentives of candidates running for office, can explain the perceived importance of the candidates' websites in 2007 and 2011 – and how can possible changes in the perceived importance be explained?*

### **3. Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of our analysis is based on the work of Ward and Gibson (2009), in which they identify systemic and organizational factors that shape the use of online communication for political actors. "Drawing on the literature, we propose that three sets of factors (systematic opportunity structures, organizational capacities, and organizational incentives) may hold the key to explaining organizational activity" (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 35). As we consider this framework to be very helpful for the analysis of online communication activities, we try to adapt it to the micro-level of individual politicians in the following.

In the description of the theoretical framework of our analysis, we discuss structural characteristics of the Swiss national elections and the Swiss political and media system, from which we deduce hypotheses for the empirical analysis. Due to our interest in the changes between 2007 and 2011, and the longitudinal perspective this paper thus adopts, we will discuss for each characteristic whether and how it might have changed between 2007 and 2011.

#### **3.1 Structural characteristics of the Swiss political system**

Personalization and decentralization can be seen as structural determinants of the political system, which affect the significance of online communication (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 35-36). The underlying assumption is that these factors favour a more innovative campaign environment (Gibson & Römmele, 2005; Zittel, 2003).

The decentralization of the Swiss political system is cemented by a comparatively strong degree of federalism (Linder & Steffen, 2006, p. 23; Vatter, 2006, p. 98). However, it should be noted that processes like Europeanization and globalization in particular, suggest that the national legislation is becoming more dominant in recent years.

The personalization of Switzerland's political system stems from three factors. With regard to the electoral system, we find a mixture between an election of party lists and a personal election. Seats in the National Council, the chamber of parliament which is at the center of our interest, are distributed proportionally (proportional representation) among the parties which receive votes (Lutz & Selb, 2006, p. 429). Additionally, party identification is important in explaining individual voting choice (Linder, 2005, p. 71). However, among the parties and the different competing lists, candidates with the highest vote in total get elected, which is why sympathy for well-known exponents and personalities are nevertheless important. It is thus for a candidates not only important that his party wins many seats, in order to get elected, but also that the candidate himself wins many votes compared to the other members of his own party on the list, because only the first few places on each list guarantee a seat in

the parliament (Lutz & Selb, 2006, p. 434). We can thus also speak of a certain personalization of the electoral system (Selb & Lachat 2004, p. 28).

The second factor that suggests a certain degree of personalization, or at least an important role of individual politicians, is the position of parties in Switzerland's political landscape. Due to the strong federalism mentioned above, the involvement of all relevant groups in decision-making processes, the strong position of stakeholders in the consultation process, a system of (semi-)direct and consensus democracy (Lijphart, 2009), Swiss parties historically enjoy a weak position in the political system (Ladner, 2006, p. 318; Linder, 2005, p. 82).

As a third factor, which points towards personalization, competition for the available seats in the National Council can be identified. As we see in table 1, competition for a seat in the parliament among the candidates has increased from 2007 to 2011 in the cantons we selected for our study. While the ratio between candidates taking part in the elections and the available seats was 16.67 in 2007, this rate rose to 18.83 in 2011. The increase in the number of candidates compared to the national elections of 2007 may be partly due to the new parties taking part in 2011 (glp and BDP, see BFS 2011b).

Table 1: Number of candidates per seat in selected cantons, 2007 and 2011

Canton	Number of seats per canton	Candidates per seat 2007	Candidates per seat 2011
Zürich	34	24	24
Bern	26	20	21
Waadt	18	12	19
Aargau	15	16	19
St. Gallen	12	19	15
Genf	11	9	15
Mean	19.33	16.67	18.83

Bundeskanzlei (2013, p. 24); BFS (2011b)

Finally, the general importance of elections in Switzerland is rather low, due to the direct democratic instruments (popular initiatives and referenda) available to citizens and political parties. With popular initiatives and referenda, citizens have the possibility of taking corrective action and influence the political process more directly. The parliamentary elections are therefore classified as "low-salience elections" (Linder, 2005, p. 66), comparable to the elections to the European Parliament. However, as the formation of the government (Federal Council) is increasingly linked to the strength of a party in parliament, it must be assumed that the importance of parliamentary election had likely been increasing in the last years.

### **3.2 Structural characteristics of the Swiss media system**

Regarding the media system, Ward and Gibson (2009, p. 35) postulate that the role of public broadcasters, the fragmentation of the media system and the Internet penetration rate facilitate and limit the use of online communication by politicians. While the standing of public service broadcasting was relatively stable between 2007 and 2011, the fragmentation of the media system and the Internet penetration rate has changed in these four years.

Public service broadcasting in Switzerland is strong. Because of the (semi)-direct democracy, great interest is taken in ensuring that citizens are adequately informed about political, economic and cultural events. As Switzerland is a small state, there is a strong competition from foreign radio and TV stations. This explains, among other factors, why a lot of resources are allocated to public service broadcasting (Künzler, 2013, p. 27-35, 113; Künzler, 2005, p. 19).

When looking at private media organizations, Switzerland's media system is relatively fragmented. This can be attributed to the federalist structure of Switzerland which shapes the Swiss media landscape (Künzler & Kradolfer, 2012, p. 20; Blum, 2006, p. 11-12). However, concentration processes in the Swiss media system exist (Leonarz, 2012, p. 69-70). Between 2000 and 2010, the number of independent editorial offices publishing newspapers fell from 44 to 29 (Künzler & Kradolfer, 2012, p. 22). These developments indicate a decreasing fragmentation of the media system.

Conversely, the Internet penetration rate in Switzerland has increased between 2007 and 2011. While 74% of the household had Internet access in 2007, 85% did so in 2010<sup>1</sup>. The Internet penetrations rate is thus among the highest in all of Europe (BFS, 2013).

Two other aspects should be highlighted, which may have an impact on the perceived importance of online communication by political actors. Firstly, political advertising in the electronic media, such as radio and TV, is prohibited (RTVG, Art 10d; Lutz & Selb, 2006, p. 433; Donges, 2005, p. 8). This has remained unchanged between 2007 and 2011. Secondly, aspects of personalization in media coverage have increased in Switzerland. Eisenegger and Kamber (2011, p. 62) find a significant increase of personalization in the reporting of disasters, accidents and crime, and a more intense personalization of representatives in politics and business.

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<sup>1</sup> Data for 2011 are not available.



### **3.3 Individual capacities**

Individual capacities are hypothesized to exert a direct relationship on the importance that politicians assign to online communication (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 36). The capacities, which affect the online communication of candidates, are the respective personal and financial resources. Among the personal resources of a candidate, we can further differentiate between the time available, or the time spent for online communication, and the skills he or she has, referring to the rather technical capabilities for programming, setting-up, maintaining and operating a website.

A personal website which can take up the function of a representative platform of a candidate in his campaign is time-consuming, especially, to keep it up-to-date during the course of the campaign. The constant monitoring of newly emerging tools is also a task that requires a lot of time. Although a website can be set up and operated with relatively little technical knowledge, it takes considerable skills to make use of more innovative and sophisticated online features (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 36).

Even if websites are relatively cost-efficient, compared to other campaign instruments, as outlined above, they have to be of high quality and regularly supervised, in order to be (regularly) visited. This causes costs (Benoit, 2007, p. 79). Contrary to popular belief, online communication does not come "for free" (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 36).

We assume a positive relationship between the different resources of a candidate and his use and perception of online communication. The more resources a candidate has at his disposal, the higher the quality and quantity of his online tools.

### **3.4 Individual incentives**

Individual incentives are considered to be "key factors" (Gibson & Ward, 2009, p. 36) in explaining the adoption and use of online communication. Individual incentives cannot only help to clarify whether online communication instruments are used in the first place, but also determine how politicians implement online communication.

Among the different incentives for political candidates to use online communication mentioned by Gibson and Ward (2009, p. 36), we will first focus on the political orientation of a candidate. However, there is no consensus in the literature about the parties or candidates who profit most from online communication (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 36). It is nevertheless likely, that the importance of online communication tends to be greater for parties located at the poles of the political spectrum. Adapted to the Swiss context, the importance of the personal website should be higher for politicians from the SP, the SVP and the GP. For politicians of the political centre (BDP, CVP, EVP, FDP, glp) lower values of importance of

the personal website should be expected. Empirical research on the topic, however, has often shown that the 'normalization thesis' (see for example Schweitzer, 2011) can be confirmed: The use of new technologies has become mainstream in the meantime and the political actors who are powerful offline are also dominant online.

The target audience, which is to be addressed with online communication, can also be seen as an incentive for using online communication (Gibson & Ward, 2009, p. 36; Russmann, 2011). As mentioned above, access to the Internet continues to vary across age or income groups, educational background, language and region (BFS, 2011a). In addition, as voters must actively turn to the website of a political candidate (Information has to be "pulled", and is not "pushed"), the online activities of political actors are heavily shaped by the demand of the electorate (Zittel, 2009, p. 386). For individuals relying mainly on support from less Internet savvy environments, online communication should be perceived as less important. For Switzerland, we expect only small differences, as the electorate of most parties has become increasingly similar. Differences in the socio-economic composition of the electorate of the parties are hardly discernible (Linder, 2005, p. 69). The political parties in Switzerland have changed into rather general catch-all parties with no specific associated milieus (Linder, 2005, p. 71).

It is further assumed that age is an important factor in explaining the adoption and importance attributed to online communication (Gibson & Ward, 2009, p. 36-37). For younger candidates, online communication instruments may appear as a more "natural" channel, while older candidates might face bigger hurdles in adapting to new technologies (Gibson & Ward, 2009, p. 37).

The status of an individual candidate can also be important and insightful in assessing the relevance of online communication. Online communication can be used to directly reach voters (Zittel, 2009), without being dependent on the filter and selection criteria of the media. Online communication could thus be especially relevant for political candidates without an established standing and regular media coverage. In our analysis, we distinguish between Members of Parliament in the previous legislative period, and candidates who were hitherto not Members of Parliament.

As outlined in the above section, most of the structural characteristics of the political and the media system were relatively stable between 2007 and 2011. Only the Internet penetration rate, the personalization of the media system, the general importance of national elections, and the competition in the electoral system has increased, while the fragmentation of the media system has rather decreased.

We therefore expect a relatively stable influence of the systematic structural characteristics on the adoption and the perceived importance of online communication for the candidates between 2007 and 2011. Accordingly, the adoption and importance of personal websites should have changed only slightly in these four years.

#### 4. Hypotheses

In the following section, we give an overview of the hypotheses derived from the theoretical framework presented in the previous section. These hypotheses are tested by using survey data from 2007 and 2011. In line with Ward & Gibson (2009), we assume relationships between structural characteristics of the political and the media system, as well as individual characteristics of political candidates and their respective use and assessment of personal websites. Table 2 summarizes the hypotheses to be tested in this paper. We show the theoretical implication of each structural characteristic on the importance of online communication, as discussed by Ward and Gibson (2009), its state in 2007 and 2011, and the expected change in importance for candidates' websites.

Table 2: Hypotheses

Factor mentioned by Ward and Gibson, 2009	Importance for online communication by Ward and Gibson (2009)	Switzerland 2007	Switzerland 2011	Expected change in importance for candidates' websites
<b>Structural characteristics of the political system</b>				
General importance of elections	+	Low	Increasing	Increasing
Personalization in the electoral system	+	Mix between personal and party votes	Mix between personal and party votes	No change
Competition in the electoral system	+	High	Increasing	Increasing
Degree of federalism	+	High	High	No change
Strength of party organizations (party system)	-	Low	Low	No change
<b>Switzerland's political system favours the importance of individual candidates' websites. The factors are relatively stable during the four years.</b>				

Structural characteristics of the media system				
Strength of public broadcasting	-	High	High	No change
Fragmentation of the media system	+	High	Decreasing	Decreasing
Level of Internet penetration rate	+	High	Increasing	Increasing
Prohibition of political advertising	n. a.	Yes	Yes	No change
Personalization in the media system	n. a.	Increasing	Increasing	Increasing

**The media system in Switzerland favours the meaning of individual candidates' websites. The factors are relatively stable during the four years.**

Individual capacities				
Time resources	+	Positive relationship is assumed		
Financial resources	+	Positive relationship is assumed		
Skills	+	Positive relationship is assumed		
Individual incentives				
Ideology	Differentiation between pole and center parties			
Target audience	Differentiation by target group	No differences	No differences	No change
Age of politicians	-	Negative relationship is assumed		
Status of politicians	Differentiation between insiders and outsiders: Online communication primarily seen as an advantage for outsiders			

Following Gibson/Ward (2009), with own additions

## 5. Method

### 5.1 Sample

To ensure comparability between 2007 and 2011, we tried to conduct the sample-building process as similar as possible at both points in time. The sample was drawn on the basis of a deliberate selection of candidates (Roessler & Wirth, 2001, p. 289-290) following a multi-stage selection process (Früh, 2007, p. 108). As a first step, we selected the parties represented in the National Council in the previous legislative period (2003-2007 and 2007-2011, respectively). In a second step, the six (2007) and eight (2011) largest parties, by number of seats in the previous legislative period, were selected. This led to the inclusion of

the following parties in 2007: SVP<sup>2</sup>, SP<sup>3</sup>, FDP<sup>4</sup>, CVP<sup>5</sup>, GP<sup>6</sup> and the EVP<sup>7</sup> (Parlamentsdienste, 2013). 2011, the glp<sup>8</sup> and BDP<sup>9</sup> were added to the sample, as these two parties were only founded a few years ago (glp: 2007, BDP: 2008, Bundeskanzlei, 2013, p. 20).

The third step in both samples was the selection of the six largest Swiss cantons according to the number of seats in the National Council. This resulted in choosing the cantons of Zurich (34 seats), Bern (26 seats), Vaud (18 seats), Aargau (15 seats), St. Gallen (12 seats) and Geneva (11 seats). As the number of seats in the National Council is awarded in proportion to the size of the population of the cantons, these six cantons are also the six largest cantons of Switzerland in terms of the size of their population (Bundeskanzlei, 2013, p. 24).

Most parties compete with several lists in the national elections. To define a single selection criterion, we agreed upon choosing only the main list of each party, as a fourth step. We did not consider, for example, the lists of young parties and lists of sub-groups of parties, such as lists of candidates from abroad. In 2007, 773 candidates met these criteria, in 2011 937.

To find out whether a candidate was using a personal website in his election campaign, we adhered to the following search strategies:

- Reference to the personal website of a candidate on the website of the cantonal party
- Entry of a candidate on the voting advice application “smartvote”, with personal and political information about the respective candidate
- Research using search engines, entering a candidate's first and last name, as well as the name of his party

With the help of these search strategies, we were able to conclude that 362 of the selected 773 candidates had a personal website in 2007 (46.83%), while in 2011, 453 of the selected 937 candidates possessed a personal website (48.35%).

## **5.2 Data-collection and measurement**

The above mentioned 362 and 453 candidates, respectively, with a personal website, received our request to complete the questionnaire. In 2007, the survey was conducted by

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<sup>2</sup> Swiss People's Party (German: Schweizerische Volkspartei, SVP)

<sup>3</sup> Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (also referred to as Swiss Socialist Party; German: Sozialdemokratische Partei der Schweiz, SP)

<sup>4</sup> FDP. The Liberals (German: FDP.Die Liberalen, FDP)

<sup>5</sup> Christian Democratic People's Party of Switzerland (German: Christlichdemokratische Volkspartei der Schweiz, CVP)

<sup>6</sup> Green Party (German: Grüne. Grüne Partei der Schweiz, GP)

<sup>7</sup> Evangelical People's Party of Switzerland (German: Evangelische Volkspartei der Schweiz, EVP)

<sup>8</sup> The Green Liberal Party of Switzerland (German: Grünliberale Partei der Schweiz, glp)

<sup>9</sup> Conservative Democratic Party of Switzerland (German: Bürgerlich-Demokratische Partei Schweiz, BDP)

mail and used a paper-pencil questionnaire. This led to a response rate of 42.81%. In 2011, we sent the candidates an invitation to fill out an online questionnaire. After two reminders, we were able to collect 264 completed questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 58.28%. The measurement of the independent and dependent variable in the questionnaire remained unchanged between 2007 and 2011 to ensure comparability. We only added a question about the importance of new online campaigning tools such as Facebook or Twitter, to take the possible change caused by Social Media into account, while excluding some questions which were no longer of interest in 2011<sup>10</sup>. Because candidates from French- and German-speaking cantons were present in the sample, a German and French version of the questionnaire was prepared in both years.

### **5.2.1 Independent variables**

The independent variables mentioned in the hypotheses were measured directly by asking the respondents for the corresponding values. With regard to the personal resources, participants were asked to indicate how many hours per week they dedicated to their personal website in total. Financial resources were measured by asking to indicate the proportion of their overall campaign budget allocated to their personal website. To assess the individual skills of a candidate, they could tick whether they received support from their party, a professional web agency, or people from their personal environments (such as family and friends), for programming and setting-up, maintaining and running, creating images, audio and video content, or implementing interactive tools for their personal website. We summarized all these variables by computing an index over the different aspects of support the candidates received. The underlying assumption therefore holds that higher values on this index indicate more help received, while lower values mean the candidate is more Internet savvy himself, is able to do more about his personal website on his own and thus more skilled. Furthermore, candidates were asked to indicate the party and the canton they were running in, their age, their sex and whether they were already Members of Parliament in the preceding legislative period. Table 3 gives an overview of the independent variables in 2007 and 2011.

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<sup>10</sup> The exact wording of the questions is available upon request.

Table 3: Overview of the independent variables

	Obs.		Mean		SD		SE		Min		Max	
	'07	'11	'07	'11	'07	'11	'07	'11	'07	'11	'07	'11
Time	150	232	2.10	2.46	1.85	2.58	.15	.17	0	0	10	15
Budget	143	228	9.21	9.56	11.69	12.71	.98	.84	0	0	90	100
Skills	155	264	2.72	2.72	1.16	1.53	.09	.09	0	0	6	9
Age	153	209	46.8	44.5	10.43	11.40	.84	.79	21	20	69	67
	Obs.		Share in %									
	'07	'11			'07					'11		
SVP	38	37			24.52					14.02		
SP	32	61			20.65					23.11		
FDP	32	31			20.65					11.74		
CVP	22	37			14.19					14.02		
GP	8	23			5.16					8.71		
EVP	11	14			7.10					5.30		
glp*	-	24			-					9.09		
BDP**	-	33			-					12.50		
n.a.	12	4			7.74					1.52		
Zurich	34	60			21.94					22.73		
Bern	58	87			37.42					32.95		
Vaud	8	22			5.16					8.33		
Aargau	27	57			17.42					21.59		
St. Gallen	22	26			14.19					9.85		
Geneva	6	10			3.87					3.79		
n.a.	-	2			-					.76		
MPs	27	38			17.42					14.39		
New candidates	128	219			82.58					82.95		
n.a.	-	7			-					2.65		
Female	46	95			29.68					35.98		
Male	109	163			70.32					61.74		
n.a.	-	6			-					2.27		

\* Party founded in 2007 (Bundeskanzlei, 2013, p. 20)

\*\* Party founded in 2008 (Bundeskanzlei, 2013, p. 20)

### 5.2.2 Dependent variable

The main dependent variable for the hypotheses to be tested in the regression models was the importance attributed by candidates to their personal website, in 2007 and 2011. The candidates were asked to assess the importance on a scale ranging from 1 ("not important at all") to 4 ("very important") (2007:  $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = .68$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $n = 155$ ; 2011:  $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = .80$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $n = 261$ ; see also table 5 and 6 below).

### 5.3 Analytical techniques

Because the dependent variable described above is an ordinal categorical variable, the use of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression would result in biased, inefficient and inconsistent

parameter estimates (Boes & Winkelmann, 2006). Hence, to estimate the different models, ordered logit regressions were employed.

## 6. Results

Personal websites can serve as valuable representative platforms for candidates in election campaigns and have a number of advantages (Benoit & Benoit, 2005, p. 232-234), as we have outlined in greater detail above. However, these advantages do not automatically mean that all candidates running for office in the Swiss national elections employ a personal website as part of their communicational activities in their election campaigns. As we see in table 4, only 46.83 percent of the candidates selected for this study actually make use of a personal website in 2007.

Table 4: Share of candidates using a personal website in their election campaigns, 2007 and 2011

Characteristic	2007 Share in %	2011 Share in %	$\Delta$ 2011-2007 Share in %
Female	39.80	48.07	8.27
Male	51.27	48.50	-2.77
SVP	67.97	74.14	6.17
SP	56.08	66.43	10.35
FDP	65.00	62.28	-2.72
CVP	34.35	51.20	16.85
GP	22.58	35.34	12.76
EVP	27.45	17.39	-10.06
glp*	-	26.72	-
BDP**	-	49.47	-
Zurich	52.45	47.43	-5.02
Bern	50.00	60.09	10.09
Vaud	20.34	30.37	10.03
Aargau	65.17	55.00	-10.17
St. Gallen	51.04	53.27	2.23
Geneva	31.25	28.57	-2.68
German-speaking part	53.21	53.55	.34
French-speaking part	23.49	29.76	6.27
MPs	84.09	85.42	1.33
New candidates	42.04	44.11	2.07
Total	46.83	48.35	1.52

\* Party founded in 2007 (Bundeskanzlei, 2013, p. 20)

\*\* Party founded in 2008 (Bundeskanzlei, 2013, p. 20)

When looking at different characteristics of the candidates, we can shed some more light on the distribution of personal websites among the candidates. In 2007, the share of male candidates (51.27%) with a personal website, for instance, was considerably higher than the respective percentage for female candidates (39.80%). Candidates from established parties, which are also part of the national government (Parties with a seat in the Federal Council: SVP, SP, FDP, and CVP), more often had a personal website than candidates from the smaller parties GP and EVP. Candidates from the SVP (67.97%), the largest party in terms



of seats in the national council, showed the highest percentage of candidates with a personal website. When looking at candidates from different regional administrative divisions, i.e. the cantons in Switzerland, personal websites seemed to be most commonly employed in the canton of Aargau in 2007 (65.17%), while in the two largest cantons in term of population size, Zurich and Bern, only 52.45 percent and 50.00 percent of the candidates included in our sample had a personal website, respectively. In the French-speaking part of Switzerland (23.49%), i.e. for candidates from the cantons of Vaud (20.34%) and Geneva (31.25%), personal websites proved to be a considerably less common campaigning tool in 2007 than for their counterparts from the German-speaking part of the country (53.21%). While 84.09 percent of the candidates who were already Members of Parliament in the previous legislative period (i.e. between 2003 and 2007) used a personal website, only 42.04 percent of the candidates running for office without being Members of Parliament in the previous legislative period adopted this campaigning tool.

Four years later, in 2011, this picture had slightly changed. Overall, 48.35 percent of all candidates included in our study now made use of a personal website. This represents only a small increase of 1.52 percentage points compared to 2007. The share of candidates with a personal websites thus seems to be relatively stable and we do not see a considerable increase in the diffusion of personal websites employed in Swiss national election campaigns in these four year. This result is somewhat surprising, as we would have expected more candidates to employ a personal website, as internet use and technological knowledge continue to grow and internet services become more and more common in everyday people's life (BFS, 2011a). The most distinct change, however, has taken place in female candidates' share of personal websites: With an increase of 8.27 percent point, the considerable gap between female and male candidates shown in 2007 has been narrowed down to an only slight difference in 2011. Female candidates have almost completely caught up with their male counterparts regarding the use of a personal website. While some of the parties that were slightly lagging behind with respect to the share of candidates with a personal websites in 2007, such as the CVP (34.35% in 2007) or the GP (22.58% in 2007), managed to approximate the percentages of their political adversaries during the last few years (CVP: 51.20% in 2011, +16.85%; GP: 35.34%, +12.76%), the share of candidates with a personal websites from the two parties attracting the largest number of votes was increasing nonetheless. Almost three out of four candidates of the SVP (74.14%) and more than two third of the candidates of the SP (66.43%) make use of a personal website in their respective election campaigns, with increases of 6.17 and 10.35 percent points, respectively. Websites seem to have become more common between 2007 and 2011 in the French-speaking part of Switzerland (29.76% in 2011, +6.27%), but are still considerably less

frequent in use than in the German-speaking part of the country (53.55%), where the share of adoption is relatively constant (+.37% between 2007 and 2011).

Candidates were further asked to directly rate the importance of the personal website in their campaigns in 2007 and 2011. As shown in tables 5 and 6, the importance of the website, as perceived by the candidates, has only slightly changed (2007:  $M = 2.93$ ; 2011:  $M = 2.85$ ). Personal websites seem to have become slightly less important since the last national election campaign in Switzerland – as least in the eyes of the candidates: While nearly three third of the candidates perceived the website to be important in 2007 (Very important: 19.35%; rather important: 54.84%), only two third of the candidates continued to do so in 2011 (Very important: 21.21%; rather important: 46.59%).

Table 5: Importance of candidates' personal websites in their election campaigns, 2007 and 2011

	2007	2011	$\Delta$ 2011-2007
	Share in %	Share in %	Share in %
Very important	19.35	21.21	1.86
Rather important	54.84	46.59	-8.25
Rather not important	25.16	26.52	1.35
Not important at all	.65	4.55	3.90
n.a.	-	1.14	-
Total	100.00	100.00	.00

2007:  $n = 155$ ; 2011:  $n = 264$

To further differentiate the relevance of a personal website, candidates were asked to rank various instruments typically used in election campaigns. In 2007, the most important instrument as seen by the candidates we surveyed was the mailing of advertisement material ( $M = 2.20$ ). In 2011, however, candidates indicated that the direct, personal contact with possible voters was now the most important communicational element of their campaign ( $M = 1.31$ ), and the sending out of advertisements per mail was now perceived to be the third-most important campaign instrument ( $M = 2.15$ ). Conversely, direct, personal contact with possible voters used to be the third-most important element in 2007 ( $M = 2.42$ ).

Table 6: Importance of candidates' personal websites compared to other campaigning instruments, 2007 and 2011

	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Rank per year	$\Delta$ 2011-2007
Importance (2007)	155	2.93	.68	1	4	-	
Importance (2011)	264	2.85	.80	1	4	-	-.07
Advertisement material per mail (2007)	155	2.20	1.32	1	5	1	
Advertisement material per mail (2011)	264	2.42	1.35	1	5	3	+2
Billboards (2007)	155	2.21	1.27	1	5	2	
Billboards (2011)	264	2.41	1.28	1	5	2	0
Direct contact with possible voters (2007)	155	2.42	1.28	1	5	3	
Direct contact with possible voters (2011)	264	2.15	1.31	1	5	1	-2
Advertisements in newspapers (2007)	155	2.61	1.30	1	5	4	
Advertisements in newspapers (2011)	264	3.10	1.32	1	5	4	0
Personal website (2007)	155	3.03	1.25	1	5	5	
Personal website (2011)	264	3.25	1.26	1	5	5	0

Importance 2007/2011: Mean calculated on a scale from 1 ("not important at all") to 4 ("very important")  
 Campaigning instruments: Mean calculated from the ranking of the different instruments from 1 ("most important instrument") to 5 ("least important instrument") by the candidates. The lower the mean, the more important the given instrument.

All the other instruments we asked the candidates to evaluate did not change their place in the ranking of the different campaigning elements between 2007 and 2011. Billboards (2007:  $M = 2.21$ ; 2011:  $M = 2.41$ ) were consistently considered to be the second-most important element on the list, advertisements in newspapers (2007:  $M = 2.61$ ; 2011:  $M = 3.10$ ) were seen as the fourth-most important tool, and the personal website was considered to be the least important instrument, both in 2007 ( $M = 3.03$ ) and 2011 ( $M = 3.25$ ). While a majority of the candidates indicated that the personal website was important (2007: 74.19%; 2011: 67.80%) in their election campaigns at both time points, it was nevertheless seen as the least important instrument among the ones we asked the candidates to evaluate. The only slowly growing diffusion of personal websites mentioned above is thus matched by a slightly declining evaluation of importance.

Compared to other online communication instruments available in election campaigns, however, which only have begun to attract greater interest in the last few years and were therefore not included in 2007, the personal website fares clearly better ( $M = 2.08$ ). As shown in table 7, only voting advice applications are more important in the eyes of the candidates ( $M = 1.60$ ). All other representative forms of online communication, such as appearances on Facebook ( $M = 2.23$ ), Twitter ( $M = 3.63$ ), and YouTube ( $M = 4.03$ ) are perceived to be less important.

Table 7: Importance of candidates' personal websites compared to other online campaigning instruments, 2011

Rank 2011		Obs.	Mean	SD	Min	Max
1.	Voting advice applications*	264	1.60	.95	1	5
2.	Personal website	264	2.08	.90	1	5
3.	Facebook	264	2.23	.93	1	5
4.	Twitter	264	3.63	1.11	1	5
5.	YouTube	264	4.03	1.11	1	5

\* In Switzerland: <http://www.smartvote.ch>

Online instruments: Mean calculated from the ranking of the different instruments from 1 ("most important instrument") to 5 ("least important instrument") by the candidates. The lower the mean, the more important the given instrument.

Table 8 and 9 show the results from the different regressions models computed to determine the predictors which determine the importance attributed to personal websites by candidates in each year. All regression models obtained significant chi-squared values, with pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> values ranging from .019 to .10. Findings are summarized model by model, before comparing the influence of a predictor year by year.

Table 8: Analyses of the perceived importance of personal websites, 2007

	Capacities	Incentives	Full Model
Time	.24* (.10)		.29* (.11)
Budget	.0042 (.013)		-.0099 (.016)
Skills	.093 (.081)		-.068 (.17)
BDP		-	-
CVP		0 (.)	0 (.)
EVP		-.99 (.72)	-.69 (.79)
FDP		-.43 (.58)	-.26 (.64)
glp		-	-
GP		.48 (.84)	.73 (.88)
SP		-.37 (.57)	-.27 (.63)
SVP		-.35 (.55)	-.42 (.61)
Aargau		0 (.)	0 (.)
Bern		.16 (.49)	.17 (.54)
Geneva		-.095 (1.00)	.18 (1.02)
St. Gallen		.13 (.60)	.17 (.64)
Vaud		-.45 (.80)	-.67 (1.00)
Zurich		.71 (.54)	1.08* (.61)
Age		-.01 (.018)	-.0049 (.02)
Status		.53 (.47)	.69 (.53)
Sex		-1.38** (.40)	-1.15** (.42)
Obs.	140	143	131
Pseudo R-squared	.028	.08	.10
Log likelihood	-135.52	-137.17	-117.40
Model Significance ( $\chi^2$ )	7.68 <sup>+</sup>	23.70*	27.38*

Ordered logistic regression coefficients shown for all models, with robust standard errors in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 9: Analyses of the perceived importance of personal websites, 2011

	Capacities	Incentives	Full Model
Time	.098 <sup>+</sup> (.055)		.15* (.068)
Budget	.024* (.012)		.032* (.014)
Skills	.019 (.084)		-.017 (.10)
BDP		0 (.)	0 (.)
CVP		-.65 (.54)	-.23 (.63)
EVP		.22 (.83)	.72 (.88)
FDP		-.37 (.55)	-.69 (.66)
glp		-1.61** (.62)	-1.22 <sup>+</sup> (.69)
GP		-1.22* (.56)	-.82 (.62)
SP		-.19 (.45)	-.063 (.52)
SVP		-.027 (.53)	.1 (.61)
Aargau		0 (.)	0 (.)
Bern		-.25 (.4)	.36 (.44)
Geneva		-.91 (.75)	-1.00 (1.00)
St. Gallen		-.45 (.58)	.02 (.60)
Vaud		-.69 (.54)	-.83 (.66)
Zurich		.52 (.43)	.83 <sup>+</sup> (.48)
Age		-.025* (.013)	-.034* (.015)
Status		.44 (.45)	1.03* (.52)
Sex		-.91** (.3)	-.59 <sup>+</sup> (.34)
Obs.	214	203	169
Pseudo R-squared	.019	.075	.095
Log likelihood	-249.05	-218.49	-179.36
Model Significance ( $\chi^2$ )	9.41*	35.48**	37.59**

Ordered logistic regression coefficients shown for all models, with robust standard errors in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

For the factors referring to the personal capacities of an individual candidate, the variable indicating the hours of time a candidate invests per week for his personal website obtained a positive and significant coefficient in all models. The positive relationship suggests that the more time a candidate invests, the higher the perceived importance of his website is. The financial resources used for the personal website were only significant in 2011, but show a positive relation as well. The bigger the share of the overall budget allocated to the personal website, the higher is the attributed importance of a candidate's website. The personal skills of a candidate, however, do not seem to play a role, as the coefficients were not significant in all of the computed models. To discuss possible concerns of multicollinearity, correlation coefficients for time and budget are shown in table 10. The rather low coefficients suggest that multicollinearity does not seem to be problematic.

Table 10: Bivariate relationship between invested time and financial resources, 2007 and 2011

	Budget 2007	Budget 2011
Time 2007	.16 <sup>+</sup>	
Time 2011		.14*

2007: n = 140; 2011: n = 214

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

With regard to party affiliation of the candidates and the cantons they were competing in, included as parts of the personal incentives a candidate has, no variable was significant in 2007. In 2011, we see negative and significant coefficients for candidates from the glp and the GP, indicating that candidates from these parties seem to perceive the importance of personal website lower than their counterparts from the other parties. For 2011, we do neither see an influence of the canton a candidate was running in on the perceived importance of personal websites.

A more important variable in explaining the importance attributed to personal website seems to be the sex of a candidate, as this factor obtained significant – and negative – coefficients in all of the computed models. This suggests that female candidates rate a personal website significantly higher – and thus perceive it as more important – than male candidates. While the status of candidate – whether he was already Member of Parliament when taking part in the national elections – plays no role, the age of a candidate was important in explaining the importance attributed to personal websites, at least in 2011. In 2007, we see no influence of a candidate's age. In 2011, younger candidates assessed the importance of personal websites in their respective election campaigns significantly higher than older candidates. The younger a candidate was, the more important he or she thinks his or her personal website is.

## 7. Discussion and conclusions

As we have outlined in this paper, personal political websites could potentially be used as an important representative platform for candidates competing in election campaigns. However, between 2007 and 2011, there was only a small increase in the percentage of candidates who used this instrument in Swiss national elections. Only about every second candidates is using a personal website in his election campaign. With the emergence of new online campaigning tools, such as Facebook or Twitter, which further absorb temporal and financial resources, this only slow rate of growth is unlikely to rocket substantially upwards until the next elections in 2015 are held. This relatively small proportion of candidates with a personal website is somewhat surprising, as both the political and the media system would in fact favour the adoption of personal websites, when we apply the structural characteristics deemed to be important in explaining online communication by Ward and Gibson (2009). As we have mentioned, however, we have adapted Ward and Gibson's original framework,

which is formulated rather generally to cover a number of political contexts, to the specific Swiss context. Furthermore, we have transferred their analysis from the level of political organizations to the individual level of political actors – i.e. political candidates. As we still think that we have included the most relevant contextual factors for explaining the adoption of political websites in Switzerland, the importance of the national parliamentary elections in Switzerland, which might be increasing, but is still comparably low, might be the decisive structural characteristic in the Swiss context, which prevents more candidates to set up their own website. Additionally, we have to take into account that only a small share of the candidates present on the lists has a real chance of getting elected. Most parties try to compete with the maximum number of candidates allowed on their lists, which corresponds to the number of seats available in a given canton, but after the first few spots on each lists, which are reserved for candidates who were already Members of Parliament in the previous legislative period, and some other hopeful prospects, the remainder of the lists are often filled with less ambitious candidates. These candidates might also invest less time and money in their campaign, which would mean consequentially, that they do not employ some more sophisticated campaigning instruments such as websites in their personal campaign.

We have also seen that the temporal and financial resources have remained remarkably stable in the last four years. Not only the importance of the website has just slightly changed, but also the resources invested in it. The ordered logit models show that especially the invested temporal resources are important in explaining a candidate's assessment of his personal website. However, as these have remained quite stable, the slight decrease in the importance attributed to personal websites fits the picture well. We can further conclude that the importance attributed to the personal website is dependent on the sex of a candidate. Even though clearly more male than female candidates were using a personal website in 2007, female candidates rated the importance of their personal website significantly higher. In 2011, female candidates had caught up and the differences regarding the proportion of candidates with a personal websites had almost completely vanished between women and men. The difference in the perception of the importance of the personal website have persisted, however, as female candidates still rate their personal website to be more important than their male counterparts do. While some of structural characteristics we have discussed in this paper, doubtlessly play an important role in explaining the importance attributed to online communication, personal traits of the candidates themselves do also seem to be of persistent importance. The importance of personal websites in the Swiss context, both in terms of adoption and importance attributed, in any case, seems to be limited.

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